Findings Show Opioid Use Higher Among Cancer Survivors

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Doctors prescribe opioids to individuals battling cancer to help alleviate pain. And now, recent findings published in the journal Cancer suggest that use of these pain medications is more common in cancer survivors than individuals without a history of the disease, reports Healio.

For the study, conducted between 2010 and 2012, researchers at the University of Toronto examined the health records of 8,600 cancer survivors who were five or more years past their diagnosis. (The study included a total of more than 17,000 people). All participants resided in Ontario and were recipients of the Ontario Drug Benefits Program.

Next, scientists matched each survivor with individuals with no history of cancer. Researchers accounted for several factors, including the type of cancer diagnosis, other comorbidities and demographics, and excluded patients who had a cancer recurrence or second malignancy.

Results showed that cancer survivors had a higher rate of prescriptions filled for opioids (7.7) than participants without cancer (6.3). What's more, researchers noted that the number of prescriptions filled for these drugs remained high among survivors who were five to 10 years or 10 years or longer past their diagnosis.

Scientists also found that certain factors among cancer survivors, such as lower income, younger age, living in a rural neighborhood and experiencing more comorbidities, were linked to higher rates of prescriptions filled. Additionally, findings showed an elevated use of opioids by survivors of lung, gastrointestinal, genitourinary and gynecological cancers but not those who survived breast cancer.

According to Rinku Sutradhar, PhD, a senior scientist at the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences and a member of the research team, physicians must examine why opioid use seems to continue among their cancer survivors. "It may be important for cancer survivors to consider being cared for by specialized pain management teams that can offer a more integrative and holistic approach that includes a combination of drug therapy with opioids, along with physical therapy, regular exercise and psychosocial interventions," she said.

Click here to read about states that are considering laws that would allow patients to refuse opioid prescriptions.

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